

State Librarian Town Meetings Report May 21, 2007

Introduction

The State Librarian town meeting tour has come to an end amid many conversations with librarians and trustees from all areas of the state and from public, K-12, academic, and non-profit and corporate special libraries. We heard from over 470 people during at the meetings and came away with many ideas and detailed input for the Library of Michigan to consider about what libraries' current needs are and the future direction of the Michigan eLibrary. In addition to expressing themselves, participants also had a forum in which to hear what others from similar or different situations and libraries had to say. We met at the following thirteen locations through April and May 2007.

- Brighton District Library
- Clinton-Macomb Public Library
- Detroit Public Library
- Flint Public Library
- Kalamazoo Valley Community College
- Spring Lake District Library
- Jackson Community College
- Grace A. Dow Memorial Library
- Alpena County Library
- Cadillac-Wexford County Public Library
- Portage Lake District Library
- Bay De Noc Community College
- St. Ignace Public Library

We would like to thank our hosts who welcomed us into their facilities and assisted with the meetings. We would also like to thank those who attended the meetings and gave thoughtful consideration and feedback to the role and future of Michigan libraries.

The State Librarian town meetings tour came about for two reasons. The first was that Nancy Robertson wanted the chance to have an in-depth conversation with librarians from around the state and from a range of libraries about the issues the library community is facing now and what we may be facing in the future. Communication is vital as the Michigan library community deals with these tough times, both in terms of the current budget issues and the ongoing economic, demographic and technological changes in our communities and in the library world.

The Library of Michigan also needed to gather information from librarians from all areas of the state and all library types for Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) planning. Federal funds for libraries are distributed through LSTA. In order to be eligible for funds, state libraries must have a five-year plan for the use of funds. The five-year plan is the blue print for how LSTA funds will be expended in that time period. Currently the Library of Michigan is operating under the 2002-2007 Five Year Plan. As we

complete the current plan, we must prepare a new five-year plan for LSTA support of Michigan libraries from 2008 through 2012.

At each location, the group discussed the three questions below, the future of the Michigan eLibrary and what future statewide or regional services may be needed.

- What are the biggest challenges your library faces?
- What is the best service or resource your library provides?
- What services do you need that your library cannot provide for itself both now and in the next few years?

What are the biggest challenges your library faces?

In order, the top three challenges for libraries today were funding, space, and technology. These three topics were brought up more often than any other issue. The discussions brought out a wide range of variations on those themes. Many other topics were brought up less often than these top three, but often enough to be significant.

Funding is a multi-faceted issue around the state. Much of the current concern is with both the stability of funding sources and the impact of legal and economic issues on these funds. Specific points about funding included the local impact of the Headlee amendment, DDAs and TIFAs. Non-resident use and township contracts are areas of difficulty for many libraries. Another major problem with funding is the fact that as funding declines in poor economic times, usage increases. Librarians in rural and resort areas mentioned diminished local tax bases, equity of funding across geographic areas and tourist expectations and use.

Space is the second major challenge that came out of the meetings. Space is an issue regardless of where the library was located. Additional space is needed to meet multigenerational library use. Children, young adults, parents and the elderly have different expectations of libraries and have different programming needs. The same space cannot always accommodate these needs. Space is also an issue for maintaining collections and improving technology. Space issues are tied to the availability of capital and infrastructure improvement funds, especially in small communities or for historic buildings.

Technology was the third major challenge to libraries. The most important facet of this is basic funding for the technology. Additional concerns were keeping up with the pace of change, especially in smaller libraries. Many libraries in all areas of the state are having difficulty with knowing what equipment, software and services will be here to stay and require training and investment in and what will not be important in the long term. Libraries in small and rural areas are having a great deal of difficulty with supporting the technology they have. Technology support issues include staff training, keeping hardware and software upgraded and running, and trouble shooting problems. These issues applied to both public computer use and integrated library systems.

Other challenges that were mentioned, but not as overwhelmingly as the first three topics, included: the public perception of libraries; how to advocate and show the community value of libraries; how to balance old and new media in collections; how to improve public relations and “brand” libraries; what are effective outreach methods to non-users; the potential loss of cooperatives’ assistance in providing staff services for rural and small libraries; the recruitment and retention of qualified staff in small and rural libraries; staff training and development availability in small and rural libraries; reliable technology training for staff and patrons, especially about MeL; digitization of historical collections and newspapers; and managing and funding ILS upgrades. Many of the training and technology issues were more acute in small and rural libraries.

What is the best service or resource your library provides?

The second discussion question, the best resource or service libraries provide, was intended to help us focus on what are the current resources and service that are working well and should be supported. In this discussion, there were six areas that came up with overwhelming frequency, but relatively few topics that had a significant, but small number of mentions. The six major areas were staff, reciprocity and collaboration, community space, technology, programming and collections.

Quality staff is seen as the best overall resource libraries provide to users. Staff are the face of the library and as such, provide a personal interaction and a positive experience for users. Knowledgeable staff are available for quality research assistance, patron training, specialized information needs, to provide appropriate referrals, and to authenticate information. At several locations, the dedication and service of volunteers and trustees were an element of the importance of staff.

Especially in the Upper Peninsula, but throughout the state as well, we heard about the importance of reciprocity and collaboration to good services and resources. Reciprocity included interlibrary loan, MeLCat, MeL and cooperative delivery. The MeL databases were also included in this area. Both local libraries participating in lending materials and the statewide management of MeLCat and MeL were seen as a defining library service and a way to provide the broadest level of materials to patrons, regardless of library size and location.

The library as a community space was also seen as one of the best services provided to residents. The library building was seen as a free space open to all that was bringing community members together, even if they were not using other library resources or services, but were just using meeting rooms. The library as a place was variously described as a prepaid community hub, a destination, functional space for community groups, an anchor in both neighborhoods and downtowns, and overall, as an available environment for resident needs and community building.

The availability of technology was the fourth most mentioned service or resource. In the discussions, the library as a place where internet access, especially wireless, is available to all, was seen as a vital service in these days of having everything from government

services and job applications to MeL online. Librarians felt the access fills a technology gap between those with the income to access these services and collections at home and those who do not. Another element to the availability of technology is the library as a place online with online catalogs and patron initiated services, especially MeLCat.

Programming was the next most commonly discussed library best service. Libraries are often the only place for a range of necessary programming, including literary, literacy, technology, job search skills, etc. Programming for children was seen as the most important type of programming. In several locations, the fact that libraries are the primary place that children can attend pre-emergent literacy programs and parents can receive information on how to encourage and improve their children's reading and literacy levels was emphasized. Teen programming was also seen as a vital programming area as the programs help keep young adults interested in reading and learning during a stage of life when many disconnect.

Finally, those attending the sessions felt that their collections were a vital resource in their communities and in the state. For many users, the fact that there are materials available for free on the topic they need can be life changing. Many people commented on special collections unavailable anywhere else in their communities as well, such as foreign language materials, local history, genealogy, home schooling support and special formats for disabled patrons and increasingly for online patrons.

What services do you need that your library cannot provide for itself both now and in the next few years?

The final discussion question was what services cannot be provided locally that are needed by libraries in the next few years. This question was intended to help clarify how the challenges libraries are facing can be addressed regionally or statewide, instead of library by library. Through the meetings, the four areas came up again and again. These were resource sharing and delivery, online databases, technology support, and coordinated marketing.

Resource sharing through MeLCat participation and/or interlibrary loan is a vital collaboration between Michigan libraries. More participation is seen as a way to improve the amount of resources available. Many participants wanted the inclusion of audiovisual or other special formats in MeLCat. As the rate of participation and of patron use increases, libraries are struggling with delivery though. Support for an efficient, simple statewide delivery system is something libraries of every size felt was important, but it was especially important to small and rural libraries.

The MeL databases received the second largest amount of comments. Large public and academic libraries cannot support the range of databases available through MeL at a local level. For those that can purchase databases, having MeL allows the libraries to spend those funds on additional materials or programs. For those libraries without the funds to purchase databases, MeL provides an equitable, base level of access to online materials that small and rural libraries cannot support on their own. MeL provides a large, basic

collection to the entire state that is available to users when and where they want to use it. This baseline collection is seen as a vital component to local budgeting and collection development decisions and as such, continued statewide support is necessary.

Technology support was the third most frequently discussed issue. Libraries around the state articulated a need for help with the pace of technological change through training for staff and patrons. Training such as downloadable training materials and online tutorials was preferred. A need for additional service hours and an online presence led to multiple discussions of a statewide 24-hour reference service. Libraries need assistance with technology support when there are software or hardware problems with public access and library catalogs as many libraries do not have the staffing level to have even part-time technical support personnel. Libraries in rural areas are concerned about the level of connectivity that is available for both the library and their patrons. Finally, many small libraries feel the only way to have or to upgrade and improve online library systems is to have regional catalogs or statewide support for local initiatives.

The last topic that generated a significant amount of discussion around the state is marketing libraries. A statewide campaign to raise the perception of library value is considered a vital way of improve funding, which underlies many of the other challenges libraries are facing. Points raised in this area included demonstrating the current and future relevancy of libraries and raising awareness of how libraries are funded. Libraries were also interested in having training and materials such as templates on marketing for local use.

Other needs that were mentioned included materials for and assistance with advocacy, capital expenditures support for buildings to improve facilities and provide space for new technologies and programming; funding for programming; improved professional development opportunities for staff, especially in specialized topics such as grants writing, archives, book repair, public sector accounting, etc. The need to provide this type of training remotely was a focus for small and rural libraries, especially in the Upper Peninsula and the upper Lower Peninsula.

Future of MeL

Each town meeting also discussed the current and future Michigan eLibrary. Additional databases were cited as the most basic need for MeL. Suggestions included auto repair manuals, audio downloads, legal forms, emergent literacy materials, foreign language materials, investment data, a Facts on File type of database and additional newspapers. Other comments included the need for content aimed at librarians, a way to include local activities and resources in local pathfinders, and more digitized historic materials for MeL Michigan.

Marketing for MeL was raised at nearly every town meeting location. Attendees felt that press releases and other statewide public relations materials should be available for local use. Another possibility raised to reach out to young adults and local communities was video marketing on sites such as YouTube and on local access channels. Other ideas

included targeted marketing to specific media people or constituencies such as teachers, using a celebrity spokesperson, having a slogan (“You’ve got MeL,” “Where’s your MeL?”), focusing on unique elements such as MeL Michigana, and including local library information in MeL marketing.

Technological issues raised about MeL included adding a 24 hour reference service or homework help such as tutor.com, having Web 2.0 features, especially to facilitate librarian networking, improving federated searching across the databases, and using RSS feeds for newspaper or magazine content additions. Finally, the addition of training materials and tutorials for librarians and the public was considered an important improvement.

Other topics raised included improved packaging procedures, the delivery of non-returnables, offering training at non-library professional conferences in the state and the development of sustainable funding for MeL and MeLCat.

Future statewide initiatives for libraries

The last topic of the day at each meeting was what other statewide or regional services are needed in the future that could be provided by the Library of Michigan, library cooperatives or library organizations such as the Michigan Library Association or the Michigan Library Consortium. The discussion on this last question covered four main topics: advocacy, marketing, staffing and technology.

Libraries are looking for statewide advocacy and marketing campaigns. Many librarians felt these were areas that were difficult to do with local staffing levels and that for many libraries, it would be reinventing similar materials and activities. Materials that can be used locally were the primary need as well as a statewide campaign in both areas that librarians could then supplement locally with the provided materials. Collaborations with cultural institutions were also seen as a way to market libraries.

Attendees also felt a statewide need was training to improve staff knowledge and local services. Some suggestions included consistent distance education, perhaps through videoconferencing, online training tutorials for staff and patrons, train the trainer workshops for regional topics and continuing education for more types of training. While technology topics are needed, such as MeL searching and Web 2.0 technologies, many felt the training should be on a wide range of topics.

Finally, attendees felt that statewide leadership on technology would improve library services. The major suggestions were support for a statewide open source software catalog or leadership in standardization and integration of commercial integrated library systems, newspaper digitization support and a statewide migration management and/or repository for digitized collections.

Other issues brought up that would benefit from a statewide focus were statewide pricing of home delivery and for library shipping with an overnight service, statewide early

childhood and young adult literary/literacy programs, a management plan and/or a centralized repository for collection storage and traveling special format or language collections.

Conclusion

The take away message we found at each meeting was that while Michigan's libraries are facing immediate and severe challenges, the libraries have dedicated staff that continue to develop and provide quality collections and services to their patrons. Some of our best services and resources are those we develop collaboratively and the solutions to many of our short and long-term issues will be solved in the same manner. Together we can improve library services in our own communities by improving them throughout the state.

Where will we go from here?

The Library of Michigan will take the ideas and issues raised at the town meetings as the basis for planning the next Library Services & Technology Act five-year plan. We will also work with the library cooperatives, the Michigan Library Consortium, the Michigan Library Association, the Michigan Association of Media in Education, the Special Library Association and others, including you, to bring about solutions and improvements in services to Michigan's libraries and to Michigan's library users.